



ACORN: War on the Poor

ACORN's ostensible attempts to help the poor take several forms: agitating against employers to pay a "living wage," working to organize trade unions, advocating for employer-paid health insurance, and pushing for safe workplaces. However, ACORN actively opposes each of these policies as applied to its own employees.

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The real goal of such advocacy appears to be the accretion of power and money to the bosses of ACORN, who are enriching themselves on the backs of the poor, rather than any altruistic public purpose. It has become something of a "one-stop shop" for unions who farm out labor agitation. The way it works, in brief, is this: ACORN partners with wealthy trade unions that pay ACORN large sums of money to organize a labor protest. ACORN, in turn, hires protestors, paying them poverty-level wages with no benefits, to agitate against Wal-Mart and other retailers for allegedly paying poor wages and no benefits. Ironically, those ACORN picketers often earn less than the ones inside the retailers that are the object of the picketing.

For example, ACORN has partnered with the 1.3 million member United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) and the Service Employees International Union (SIEU) for an all-out assault on Wal-Mart, under the umbrella of numerous ACORN front groups such as Wake Up Wal-Mart, Wal-Mart Organizing Project, Wal-Mart Alliance for Reform Now, Site Fighters, and the Wal-Mart Workers Association, among many more. ACORN did not break the bank on the protestors it hired for the campaign, since they made less than Wal-Mart entry-level employees. But ACORN is paid well to organize protests. SIEU, for example, paid \$500,000 to ACORN for one such protest, and gives a total of over \$4 million a year to the organization. A number of its union locals, including the Wade Rathke headed New Orleans local, pay rent to ACORN. Similarly, UFCW also hired another ACORN front as a "consultant for organizing program" at a cost of \$429,431.

Such protests don't appear to be much fun at the ground level. The *Las Vegas Weekly* described one such operation in colorful terms:

The shade from the Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market sign is minimal around noon; still, six picketers squeeze their thermoses and Dasani bottles onto the dirt below, trying to keep their





Written by [Denise Behreandt](#) on October 31, 2008

water cool. They're walking five-hour shifts on this corner at Stephanie Street and American Pacific Drive in Henderson-anti-Wal-Mart signs propped lazily on their shoulders, deep suntans on their faces and arms-with two 15-minute breaks to run across the street and use the washroom at a gas station.

That experience may be preferable to the one enjoyed by some non-union workers in Nevada on a UFCW sponsored Wal-Mart picketing project, employed as temp workers: "They're making \$6 an hour, with no benefits; it's 104 F, and they're protesting the working conditions inside the new Wal-Mart grocery store." Inside, the Wal-Mart entry level wage was 6.75 per hour, and it was air conditioned. One picketer, a Sal Rivera, used to work at Wal-Mart, where he made \$8.63 an hour. He'd consider re-applying.

According to a 2006 report by the Employment Policies Institute, ACORN "may be the most hypocritical employer in America," because it denies its own employees the "living wage" it would mandate for others. It even seeks exemption from paying minimum wage increases which it demands from employers it pickets, has to be forced by government to pay overtime to its employees, completely misses wage payments to many of its workers, and engages in union busting tactics against its own workers who are agitating for unions at places like Wal-Mart for sub-par wages.

The wealthy bosses at ACORN forget that Wal-Mart's customers — including their own poorly paid employees — often live paycheck to paycheck and thus benefit from Wal-Mart's lower prices. ACORN's recently deposed head honcho, Wade Rathke, stated, "I do not pretend that we do not shop at Wal-Mart regularly." If that weren't enough, leftist magazine *The Nation* contained a Rathke interview in which he said about Wal-Mart, "I love that d***** store.... They do have something that works. You can't just convince people they're evil."

How does ACORN figure out what to demand from its "greedy" corporate targets? The demands apparently aren't the product of much analysis. Jen Kern, head of ACORN's Living Wage Resource Center, testified about the wage demand for their Oakland, California, campaign, saying, "We just made that number up."

In the end, every credible economist acknowledges that large mandated increases in entry level wages price needy persons out of jobs. Most minimum-wage jobs are filled by young people, summer workers, or those starting up the business ladder. These employees begin careers in low-wage slots, and use such opportunities to get experience and then move to better positions.

ACORN's fanatic demand for elimination of such lower-paying jobs harms the very people it claims to champion — the poor, the low-skilled, minorities, and women. Meanwhile, the union bosses and their patrons in ACORN rake in millions. The poverty business pays quite well at the top, and very badly at the bottom, especially at ACORN.

This article is the third installment in a four-part series on ACORN. The other articles are:

[The Roots of ACORN](#)

[ACORN: Disenfranchising Voters](#)

[ACORN: No Business Like Poverty Business](#)



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